

# Dining With MacK and Kate

Following the success of their MacK & Kate's Café & Wine Bar in Kingston Springs, the Strawn family serves up another great Nashville-area eatery. By **James T. Black**

**S**ome said they were crazy. Jan Strawn almost agreed.

When she and her husband, Bernie, announced the opening of MacK & Kate's Café & Wine Bar four years ago, "some of our friends suggested we were crazy," Jan says. "And we began to think we were crazy too, opening a white-tablecloth restaurant 18 miles outside of Nashville, in the country."

**Fun With Fine Dining** Named after their two daughters, MacKenzie and Kathleen, the popular eatery in Kingston Springs quickly became a hit with local diners, critics, and celebrities—and a full-time job for the entire family.

"Then one of our regular customers told us his bank, Tennessee Bank & Trust, was opening a new branch in Green Hills, not far from where we live," Jan says. "They were thinking of putting a fine dining restaurant inside the bank. So we thought, 'Why not?'"

A few months later, Mackes (pronounced "Mack-ees")

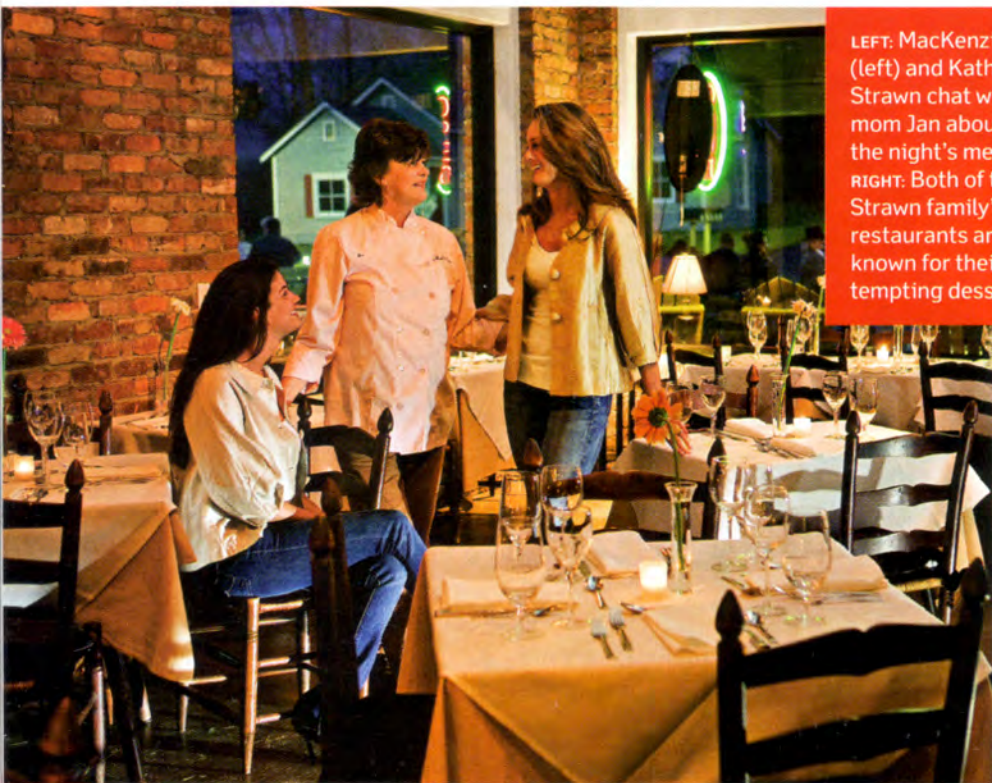
Restaurant debuted and erased any doubts about the Strawns' sanity. Like the family's Kingston Springs eatery, the small but sophisticated restaurant in Grace's Plaza quickly earned rave reviews for its fine food, excellent service, and congenial surroundings.

"It's a special occasion kind of place," Jan says. "Mackes is contemporary fine dining with a city feel, while MacK & Kate's offers the same great food in a country atmosphere."

Nashville residents started making the 18-mile drive to Kingston Springs shortly after MacK & Kate's opened. "I've been an entrepreneur for most of my adult life, but I've always loved to cook," Jan says.

**A Snowball's Chance** Jan and Bernie rented space in a former service station on the small town's Main Street and turned it into a catering kitchen. A friend suggested they put in a few tables—and MacK & Kate's Café & Wine Bar was born. "We were open about two weeks when Jim Myers came by," Jan says.

A food writer for *The Tennessean*, Myers raved



**LEFT:** MacKenzie (left) and Kathleen Strawn chat with mom Jan about the night's menu. **RIGHT:** Both of the Strawn family's restaurants are known for their tempting desserts.





Dad Bernie Strawn had a good reason for opening a second eatery: "Two daughters in college," he says. MacK and Kate attend The University of Alabama.

about Jan's tempting twists on down-home dishes such as macaroni and cheese and beef short ribs. "He told his readers, 'You have to get out to Kingston Springs and eat at this restaurant,'" Jan says. "After that, it started to snowball."

The snowball turned into an avalanche when country music stars Amy Grant and Vince Gill dropped in for dinner. Soon other celebrities were standing in line with local folks to get into the 85-seat restaurant.

"There are only three of us in the kitchen—two chefs and me. We do everything from cooking to washing dishes," Jan says. "And we work hard to make it a laid-back, comfortable atmosphere."

**On-the-Job Education** Jan has two chefs helping her in Kingston Springs and two in Nashville; she enjoys working with a tiny but talented staff.

"My official title is chief cook and bottle washer; everybody went to culinary school except me," she says. "It helps that we come from different backgrounds. One chef is trained in classic French cuisine, and another comes from a family of cooks in Puerto Rico. We can take something basic like macaroni and cheese, add lobster and brie, and it becomes a signature dish."

Jan makes it a point to keep learning. "I don't

like sticking to one style, so twice a year I'll go to someplace like Miami to study Latin cuisine," Jan says. "We don't want to do what everybody else in Nashville is doing, so we get out of the region and learn new things."

That work ethic extends to the restaurants' namesakes, MacK and Kate. "The girls were in high school when we opened the first restaurant, so they've grown up doing everything from busing tables to taking orders," Jan says. "They're in college now and work in restaurants during the school year, and then come home to work here in the summer."

While she's really not sure how her family ended up running two of Nashville's most successful restaurants, Jan does have one theory. "I guess our friend was right," she says with a smile. "Maybe we're all a little crazy." ●

MacK & Kate's Café & Wine Bar, 385 North Main Street, Suite 106, Kingston Springs, is open for dinner Wednesday-Saturday. Visit [www.mackandkates.com](http://www.mackandkates.com), or call (615) 952-9511. Mackes Restaurant, Grace's Plaza, 2131 Bandywood Drive, Suite 212, Nashville, is open Monday-Saturday for lunch, Tuesday-Saturday for dinner, and 10 a.m.-2 p.m. Sunday for brunch. Visit [www.mackesrestaurant.com](http://www.mackesrestaurant.com), or call (615) 292-3838.

Jan manages both Mackes Restaurant in Nashville and MacK & Kate's Café & Wine Bar in Kingston Springs.

